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ABSTRACT

Common strategies to assist at-risk students are remediation and special programs, but these strategies are difficult to accomplish in small rural schools. A more effective strategy for rural school districts may be to improve curriculum and teacher instructional skills, but curriculum development is labor intensive. This paper examines a collaborative curriculum development project between the Arizona Department of Education, three rural school districts, and the Far West Laboratory, and focuses on one project objective: to involve districts cooperatively in the process of curriculum development, field testing, and shared feedback. During 1987-88, three workshops were held to train district teachers to translate Arizona essential skills in language arts into daily lessons and units of study and to revise curriculum units on the basis of field testing and shared feedback. Participating districts expected the following outcomes: (1) a staff trained and experienced at unit development; (2) a collection of units for field testing; (3) curriculum units revised on the basis of shared feedback; and (4) stronger contacts with other districts. Teacher and administrator evaluations confirmed that these objectives were achieved. Twelve language arts units for Grades K-4 were developed and field tested during the project. In addition, teacher morale, motivation, and collegiality were enhanced. Factors contributing to the project's success included careful selection of participating districts and teachers, setting the stage through workshop logistics, and team building. (SV)

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COLLABORATION ON CURRICULUM

PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to describe the collaborative curriculum development project conducted by Far West Laboratory, Arizona Department of Education and three rural school districts.

BACKGROUND

Students are at-risk to drop out for a variety of reasons. Poverty, drugs, pregnancy, mobility, and failing grades have all been advanced as reasons children become at-risk and drop out of school (Hahn,1987; Barber & McClellan, 1987). A study in Cincinnati examined the differences between the at-risk **dropout** and the at-risk **graduate.**(Gastright, 1989). Although the researchers emphasized that factors which predict dropouts may vary from district to district, they found that two factors seemed to predict an at-risk dropout student from an at-risk graduate. Those two factors were grades and absenteeism. A reasonable assumption for all districts would be that students who are achieving success in school, e. g., satisfactory grades, will attend school more regularly thereby increasing their chances of graduating.

The two strategies typically employed to assist at-risk students are remediation and the addition of special programs. Both of these strategies are difficult to accomplish in small, rural schools because they have less resources and fewer professional staff than their suburban and urban counterparts.

Remediation entails more and/or specialized instruction. If the classroom teacher is the only resource, the instruction takes place at recess or before and after school. The amount of remediation supplied is then limited by the responsibilities, dedication and energy level of the teacher. If auxilary people are employed, the instruction may take place during less "essential" classes. The student misses these areas of the curriculum to study an area which is a problem for him/her, usually math and reading. The remediation often is drill and may or may not be congruent with the classroom program.

As society has identified other categories of at-risk students, programs have been introduced into the schools to assist these children. Children with handicapping conditions, children for whom English is a second language, and children in low-income communities are examples of groups which have been targeted.

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Programs to alert students to such dangers as drugs and aids have been added to the curriculum.

Arizona state legislators have become concerned over low test scores as well as the dropout rate. They are providing additional funding for various grade levels such as K-3. At the same time they are requiring standards for achievement through identification of essential skills for each subject area.

The realities of the small, rural school make remediation, the inclusion of more programs and meeting state mandates a challenge. There may be incidences of all categories of students, but the numbers may be relatively small. Every new program requires someone to implement it. Providing full-blown programs for all the categories may become unmanageable with the available staff. Teachers who are asked to provide remediation or implement additional programs may spend less time in class preparation so that they can do the added tasks. The net effect may be less effective instruction resulting in more students who have academic problems. Even if funds are attached for additional personnel, hiring someone with specialized skills may be impossible in a rural area. There may be no candidates with the expertise or, because of the smaller numbers, the positions may require only a part-time employee.

If the program involves the writing of a grant, the amount of money specified for a small school may not justify the expense of hiring staff to write it. The time involved in paper work may outweigh the benefits to the student.

A more effective strategy for rural districts to address the issue may be to improve the curriculum and the teachers' instructional skills. This strategy would have an effect on all students regardless of which at-risk characteristics were present.

Because curriculum development is labor intensive and districts often duplicate efforts, it is desirable for districts to share both the workload and the products of that work. The purpose of the paper is to describe the **collaborative curriculum development project** conducted by Far West Laboratory, the Arizona Department of Education and three rural school districts.

DESIGN

There were four objectives for the project. The focus of this paper is on objective three, which was to involve districts cooperatively in a process of **curriculum development, field testing** and **shared feedback.**

Figure 1 outlines the project events during 1987-88. Three workshops were held with the teachers and some administrators from the three districts in August, November and April. Following the first two workshops, teachers were responsible for completing in-district assignments before the next scheduled workshop.

Figure 1

Schedule of Project Events

Time Period	Joint Workshop Activity	In District
August	*Presentation on language arts essential skills *Training in mastery learning unit development *Grade-level teams develop a unit *Topics set for additional units	
September-October		*Field test first unit *Each teacher drafts one more unit
November	*Targeted training *Revision of first unit following field test *Review of new units	
December		*Completion of new units
January-March		*Field test new units by grade-level teams
April	*Revision of new units *Project evaluation *Plans for future	

Language arts was chosen as the area on which to focus because of comments made by teachers who were attempting to implement the Arizona document. The comments reflected the frustration they felt when translating the broad skills into daily lessons within a textbook framework. This translation process is critical to the successful implementation of the spirit and letter of the essential skills. Because of the integrated nature of the curriculum, it was decided that it would be especially suited to delivery in unit format.

The purpose of the first workshop was four-fold: to introduce teachers to the language arts essential skills, to train teachers in the development of mastery learning units, to form three cross-district, grade-level teacher teams and have each team develop their first unit, and to set topics for additional learning units. The grade-level teams, at the kindergarten, second, and fourth-grade levels, had at least one teacher from each of the three districts.

Dr. David Squires, curriculum specialist from Red Bank Public Schools in New Jersey and national expert in mastery learning, conducted the August workshop. Assisting Dr. Squires were four members of the Arizona Department of Education(ADE). Following the workshop, teachers were responsible for field testing the learning unit over the coming months and developing a second learning unit on an agreed upon topic.

During the field testing of the first unit, a member of the ADE visited each district to assist the teachers and answer questions.

The second workshop was held for two days in November. Teachers and administrators in the three districts, ADE staff members and Dr. Robert Burns from Far West Laboratory attended the workshop. The purpose of the second workshop was to review the mastery learning principles and curriculum development techniques learned in the first workshop, to revise the first unit based on the field testing, and to exchange the new units developed by members of the grade-level teams. Teachers were responsible for field testing the new units following the workshop.

A third two-day workshop was held in April. This final workshop provided teachers time to make revisions in their units based on the field testing and to discuss what they accomplished, what the next steps were for their districts and how they might continue their curriculum development efforts.

RESULTS

There were defined outcomes for each of the agencies involved in the project. The participating districts expected the following outcomes:

-a staff trained and experienced at unit development
-a collection of units for field testing

-curriculum units revised on the basis of shared feedback
-stronger contacts with other districts.

Each of these outcomes has been achieved. This assertion is based on our experiences during the workshops, our discussions with the teachers and administrators in the project and evaluation data we have collected from the project participants. It is also based on the fact that twelve language arts units were developed and field tested during the project. There were four units at the kindergarten level, five units at the second grade level and three units at the fourth grade level.

Each of the three workshops was evaluated by the participants using a form developed by the Far West Laboratory. There were four questions used to evaluate workshops 1 and 2. The question which has implications for this paper asked, "How helpful do you think the presentation will be to your work?" The participants were to rate the question using a scale from 1-5 with 5 designating very much and 1 meaning very little. After the first workshop, fifteen of the participants rated the helpfulness as a 5 and five persons rated it as 4.

After the second workshop, nine participants rated the same question a 5, four people rated it 4, and one rated it 3.

Three of the questions from the final evaluation have relevance to this paper(See table 1). These questions highlighted cooperating across districts to develop curriculum and share instructional ideas.

In addition to rating each statement, participants were encouraged to write comments regarding each one. The following are representative of the comments made in response to statement 1:

-This helped me focus all my lessons on relevant learning. My students were successful.

-I benefited from being able to share and collect new ideas and teaching strategies from other teachers.

-My teaching of language arts has changed considerably. My students write and read more than they ever have.

Reactions such as the following to statements 2 and 3 illustrated the desire of rural teachers to interact with others:

-I learned from all involved,...enjoyed watching camaraderie develop among grade level teams.

-This has been the best part of this conference...so many good ideas and to see a unit I worked very hard on, taught and succeed is rewarding.

-It is the <u>only</u> way! Sharing ideas... made it so much easier than trying to work alone.

Table 1

Response Frequencies to Selected Statements
(15 participants)

Statement	Rating					
	agree			disagree		no response
	5	4	3	2	1	
1. I have gotten some new ideas about teaching language arts that I will continue to use in my classroom.	11	3	0	0	0	1
2. I have enjoyed meeting and sharing ideas with teachers from other districts.	15	0	0	0	0	0
3. Cooperating to share the work of curriculum development is a workable and useful idea.	13	1	1	0	0	0

At the end of the third workshop session, an additional kind of evaluation was conducted. Teachers were asked to describe how they felt after the first workshop in August, how they felt now(in April) following the third workshop, and what contributed to changes in their perceptions during the project.

In general, teachers felt overwhelmed, apprehensive, and somewhat confused and frustrated following the first workshop. There were new people to meet and work with, project expectaions and requirements were not altogether clear, and the amount of material covered in the first three-day session was extensive. This is probably not unlike most people's reactions to an intense three-day training.

Following the third workshop session, teachers reported they were more confident, committed, prepared and knowledgeable. There were many reasons given by the teachers, including the learning unit training, the time provided by the project for completing the work and the useful information about curriculum and curriculum development. The most frequent reason, however, was the cooperative work and sharing of ideas with other teachers. This, by the way, is a consistent finding from the school improvement and change literature.

DISCUSSION

There are several factors which seemed to have an effect on the project. The major ones are team selection and development, the workshop logistics and workshop facilitation.

Selection of the districts and teams needs to be done with care. The districts in the project were more than one hundred miles apart. This somewhat hampered communication. Districts should be chosen which are in the same geographic area so that opportunities for communication can be increased while keeping travel costs low. Our project also would have benefited if the teachers had been from contiguous grade levels so that the scope and sequence could have been developed over several grades.

Prerequisite knowledges and skills should be identified and the teachers screened to determine if there are knowledge gaps regarding the curriculum topic. The project design included prerequisites for participation; however, we found that many teachers from rural schools could not meet one of the pre-requisites, training in the essential elements of instruction(EEI), so we included teachers without training. Even though we modified the first training session to include Hunter's terms and concepts, lack of this prerequisite contributed to several problems encountered during the project. Pre-training should have been provided for those teachers who lacked the skills and knowledge.

A second factor is setting the stage for success through workshop logistics. The teachers in the project welcomed the opportunity to work in a professional setting. Meeting in a hotel conference room established an environment through which the teachers felt valued and special. They thrived on having uninterrupted time to discuss instructional matters. We were often reluctant to stay on schedule because it required stopping productive discussions.

Team development is a third factor. Teachers from rural schools are used to working independently. They alone decide what curriculum should be emphasized. They make instructional decisions without confering with others. It was apparent during the first workshop that some individuals were reluctant to accept the ideas of those from other districts. They were hesitant to compromise their district's curriculum to that of other districts.

Our teams had another hurdle to overcome. Those participants without EEI training were skeptical of suggestions made by those who were trained. Those with training were able to understand and use the model more effectively than the others. This resulted in disagreements as to instructional techniques.

The second meeting showed progress in team building. All teachers had field tested the model unit so they understood the components more clearly. One teacher had become aware that EEI training could improve her instruction so she registered to receive training during the spring semester.

It was during the third meeting that it became obvious that the teams were now functioning. As the participants entered the room, they went to their groups and began discussing the units before the workshop began. A sense of accomplishment and unity permeated the room. Respect for one another was demonstrated in many ways. The remaining teachers who had lacked training in EEI expressed a desire to have all their faculty trained and requested their administrators to make inservice arrangements.

This team formation would not have happened without periodic meetings and the last major factor, external facilitators. The facilitators from ADE and Far West Laboratory focused the discussions, encouraged the teamwork and monitored the progress of the units. At least one external faciliator is critical to collaboration across districts. Without the guidance and mediation of such a person, the work would be characterized by conflict and lack of compromise. Strong individuals, used to working independently, need help in learning to accept ideas from others.

The three primary benefits to the districts were an improved curriculum, enhanced instructional skills and a cadre of motivated teachers. An improved curriculum with field tested units as models for future work was one of the outcomes planned for the project. This is especially useful as rural schools do not have the time and personnel to develop their own models. Whenever state guidelines are written, personnel from large districts want only broad guidelines while those from small districts clamor for detail, especially examples they can use and adapt. This project provided for those examples.

Rural school personnel had expressed concern about responding to the challenge of implementing the language arts essential skills document. The participants too found it difficult to translate the skills of the document into the unit and daily lessons needed to deliver instruction. Doing a task analysis to define the objectives was one of the most frustrating aspects of the project for the participants. Many of them had no experience in analyzing the steps necessary to perform such tasks as writing a report, an invitation or a story.

A related benefit is that through field testing, structured reflection and revision, the teachers understand more clearly how to accomplish curriculum development. The districts now have teachers at three grade levels who are able to provide leadership during further curriculum development.

Using the mastery learning unit format, which was compatible to the language arts essential skills document, helped in this comprehension. It provided for the "chunking" or clustering of skills so that daily lessons would be sequenced.

The second major benefit, teacher growth, was an unanticipated bi-product of the process. The process became an opportunity for staff development whereby the teachers became more knowledgeable about

instructional techniques. Kierstead and Mentor(1988) also found that greater effects were achieved by combining the two areas.

The early attempts at writing units illustrated a problem in designing insruction. While the teachers had an repertoire of exciting and worthwhile activities, they were selecting activities which were unrelated to the objective. They had to begin focusing on the objectives and not the activites.

Other instructional skills which were emphasized were writing clear objectives, evaluating student progress and focusing the students before beginning the lesson. All teachers reported that they would continue to use the techniques in their classrooms.

Another unanticipated result was the enhanced morale and motivation of the participants. The cooperative nature of the project, with teachers working in grade level teams across districts, was particularly useful for the sharing of materials and instructional techniques. In fact, it was the single most useful aspect of the project. Teachers enjoyed the opportunity to talk to each other about instruction and to share procedures which worked for them. They were motivated to request further inservice in many of the aspects of the project.

In one district, collegiality was carried to the school site. Teachers worked in teams within the school on curriculum development and field testing. This kind of teamwork in schools is especially important because it contributes to the professional climate of the school. Innovations are implemented more readily in schools where patterns of collegiality allow teachers to talk to and learn from each other. Teachers benefit in countless ways from professional interaction with their peers.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The collaboration on curriculum broke down the isolation faced by rural teachers. They worked together in a focused way, learning a common language for discussing instruction and discussing in some detail approaches to language arts instruction. They were able to go beyond the superficiality of most inservice trainings or presentations. The districts now have a stronger curriculum, as well as a cadre of more competent and motivated teachers.

The effect on students can only be surmised, as no data were collected regarding student outcomes. Teachers testified that student participation was increased. They also felt their teaching was more focused and activities were congruent with objectives. The effect of improving these skills has been documented by researchers in the effective schools literature.(Blum, 1984)

A well-written curriculum taught by teachers who understand it and can employ effective instructional skills should enhance student success. Those students should be less likely to drop out and less likely to engage in at-risk behavior. Those students should be more likely to graduate.

Using the following recommendations as guidelines, this can be a powerful model for rural schools to use to improve the curriculum of the school and provide staff development in instructional skills:

1. A design which includes training, material development and periodic group reflection for revision,
2. Selection of districts which are in same geographic area,
3. Selection of teachers in contiguous grade levels,
4. Pre-training for teachers who lack prerequisites,
5. Specified responsibilities for principals so that they are actively supporting the work of the teachers,
6. A professional setting arranged to provide quality time,
7. An external facilitator to guide the workshops and monitor on-site activities,
8. A list of unit topics for one year's curriculum and
9. Secretarial help for writing and revision process. A microcomputer would be the most efficient.

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Special Note: The final report of this project, Cooperative Curriculum Development Between Districts, from which portions of this paper are taken, is available from Far West Laboratory, 1855 Folsom Street, San Francisco, CA, 94103. Authors are Nikola Filby, Robert Burns, Sharon Bolster and Kathy Verville.